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Ask the Abbot

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It was exciting to hear that the De Pere Norbertines recently re-elected the Rt. Rev. Gary Neville as their abbot. How does the election process work?

Jay DeCleene '94

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July 2012

Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings,

It was exciting to hear that the De Pere Norbertines recently re-elected the Rt. Rev. Gary Neville as their abbot. How does the election process work?

Thanks,
Jay DeCleene '94

Answer:

My dearest Jay,

Thank you for your kind inquiry into the life and practices of my beloved confreres. A Norbertine abbatial election is a sacred practice and, compared to this country's contentious political elections, a simple affair suffused with prayer and contemplation.

The process begins about a month before the appointed election day, when members of each house of St. Norbert Abbey – the De Pere abbey itself, St. Joseph Priory on the college campus, and St. Moses the Black Priory in Raymond, Miss. – convene to celebrate Mass and discuss the challenges the abbey faces. Our intent in so doing is to discern which of our confreres we are called to elect.

On the eve of the election, all abbey members gather for vespers and holy hour, joined by the Norbertine abbot general, currently the Most Rev. Thomas Handgräter, O.Praem. The next day we celebrate Mass, and then voting begins, with the abbot general presiding.



Ask the Abbot

As the founder of St. Norbert College, and having a prime seat in the center of campus throughout the years, I, Abbot Bernard Pennings, hold the answers to many of your burning questions about the college.

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Before we elect our abbot, we first determine the length of his tenure. Most abbots serve terms of six, nine, or 12 years. For example, in the May election to which you refer, my confreres chose a nine-year term.

When we have arrived at the length of the new abbot's term, we cast written ballots to select our abbot. Voting continues in rounds until we have reached a majority. If by the third round a majority eludes us, the fourth round includes only the two men who received the most votes in the preceding round.

When we reach a majority, the abbot general asks the elected confrere if he is willing to accept the office of abbot. If he does – and his vows compel him to do so – the abbot general invests him with the pectoral cross and buttoned cape of an abbot, and the other members of the community greet the new abbot with the kiss of peace.

Responses to “Ask the Abbot” questions are penned by St. Norbert College staff in the name of Abbot Bernard Pennings, O.Praem., who founded St. Norbert College in 1898.

St. Norbert College

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